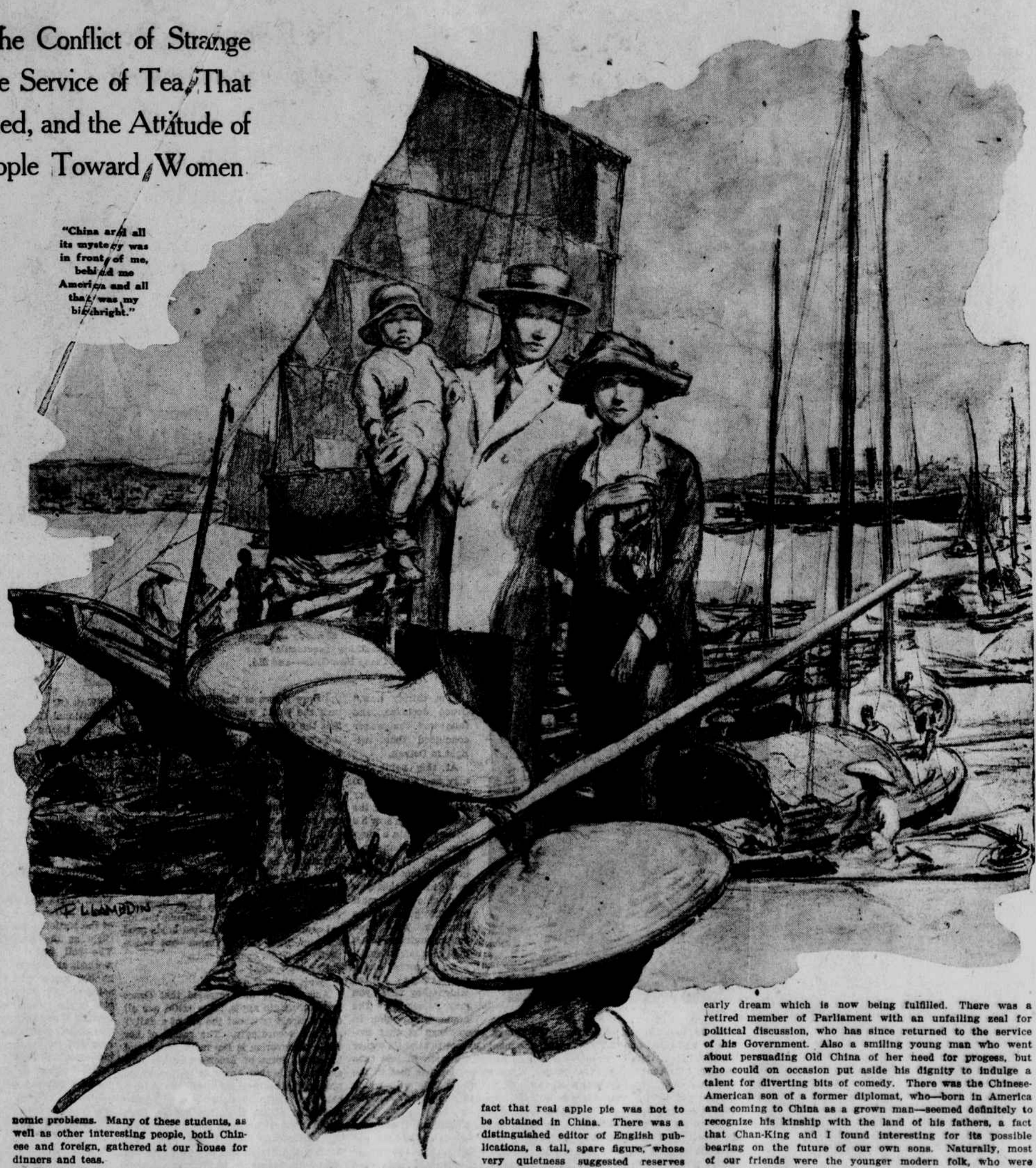
My Reception in China and My First Chopsticks

The Beginning of the Conflict of Strange Social Customs—the Service of Tea That Must Not Be Touched, and the Attitude of Her Husband's People Toward Women



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sult. He was teaching advanced English in one of the largest colleges in Shanghai, maintaining a legal practice and giving lectures on international law. He was glad to be at home again, filled with enthusiasm for his work, hopeful as the young returned students always are at first, and through sheer inability to limit his endeavors working beyond his strength.

Our happiness at being together again made all things seem possible. From its fragmentary beginnings in America we gathered again into our hands the life we expected to make so full and rich. My part, I recognized, was to be a genuinely old fashioned wife—the role I was best fitted for and the one most helpful to Chan-King. And I began by running my Chinese household with minute attention to providing for his comfort in small ways that he liked and never failed to appreciate.

Our two story house consisted of two big rooms downstairs and sleeping apartments and a tiny roof garden upstairs. In this roof garden I spent most of my time and there Wilfred and his amah passed many afternoons. It was a pleasant, sunny place, furnished with painted steamer chairs, rugs and blooming plants in pottery jars. At the back, rather removed from the main part of the house, were the kitchen, servants' quarters and an open air laundry. We were really very practical and modern and comfortable. Our kitchen provided for an admirable compromise between old and new methods. It had an English gas range and a Chinese one. But the proper Chinese atmosphere was preserved by three well trained servants, who called themselves Ah Chin, Ah Ling and Ah Poh. Most Shanghai servants are called simply "Boy" or "Amah" or "Coolie," but ours chose those names, as distinctive for servants there as James and Bridget are with us. Ah Ching did most of the housework and the running of errands; Ah Ling did the marketing and cooking, giving us a pleasantly varied succession of Chinese and foreign dishes; Ah Poh, the amah, looked after Wilfred and attended to my personal wants.

From the first I was fond of Ah Poh, with her finely formed, intelligent features, her soft voice and gentle, unhurried manner. She had served an American mistress before coming to me, but showed a surprising willingness to adopt my particular way of doing things, whether in making beds, in keeping my clothes in order or in entertaining Wilfred. On the other hand, Ah Ching, elderly, grave and full of responsibility, was very partial to his accustomed way of arranging furniture and of washing windows and floors. If left to himself, he would dust odd nooks and corners faithfully, but if I made any formal inspection of his labors he would invariably slight them—to intimate that I should not be suspicious, as a friend explained—a form of logic that I found highly amusing. Ah Ling, aside from his culinary ability, was chiefly interesting because his eyes were really oblique, as Chinese eyes are supposed to be and usually are not, and because his hair really curled, as Chinese hair is supposed never to do, and does, occasionally.

For a young pair bent on thrift we may have seemed very extravagant indeed. In similar circumstances in America I should probably have thought it extravagant to have even one servant. But this household was a very small one for China and on our modest income we maintained it with a satisfactory margin.

Chan-King was helpful and showed great tact and understanding in getting our establishment under way. I would not confess to my utter bewilderment in trying to manage servants who did not understand half of what I said to them. I think he became aware that I was holding on rather hard at times during those first months, and he never failed me. In turn I helped him revise his papers in the evenings and assisted him with his letters, and he used to call me his secreatry. We discovered during that first year in China that we had formed a true partnership.

Our social life was very pleasant. We entertained a great deal in a simple way. We belonged to a club or two and kept in close touch with the work of the returned students, who have become an important factor in the national life. Though wishing to conserve what is best in the civilization of China, they are bringing Western ideas to bear upon the solution of political, sociological and economic problems. Many of these students, as well as other interesting people, both Chinese and foreign, gathered at our house for dinners and teas.

There was a veteran of the customs service, a portly gentleman with bristling white mustache, who had been one of the first group of government students sent to America fifty years before. He told interesting stories of the trials and joys of those early days and humorously lamented the fact that real apple pie was not to be obtained in China. There was a distinguished editor of English publications, a tall, spare figure, whose very quietness suggested reserves of mental power. With him often was a short, energetic man in early maturity—a far-sighted educator and convincing orator. I remember a lively discussion opened up by these two concerning the need for a Chinese magazine devoted to the interests of the modern woman in China—an early dream which is now being fulfilled. There was a retired member of Parliament with an unfailing zeal for political discussion, who has since returned to the service of his Government. Also a smiling young man who went about persuading Old China of her need for progess, but who could on occasion put aside his dignity to indulge a talent for diverting bits of comedy. There was the Chinese-American son of a former diplomat, who—born in America and coming to China as a grown man—seemed definitely to recognize his kinship with the land of his fathers, a fact that Chan-King and I found interesting for its possible bearing on the future of our own sons. Naturally, most of our friends were the younger modern folk, who were loosening the ancient bonds of formality in their daily lives. But many of the older and more conservative people also used to come to our evening gatherings, where my husband and I received side by side.

(Continued Next Sunday.)

Burning Question of the Coifs Interests Maids of France

AMERICAN girl tourists have put French country maidens in a cruel dilemma.

Generous and liberal handed, friendly, kindly, democratic, all the same know what is what and appreciate beautiful things—especially at a bargain.

Touring through the French countryside they have picked up bargains in coifs. And thereby hangs a tale.

Coifs are the old white caps, stiff starched, of linen, often hand made, or of fluffy mousseline or tulle, embroidered beautifully by hand, often decorated with real lace and often monumental in proportions, which French country girls have been wearing these 800 years past—and are now ashamed of!

The Americans buy up the coifs, of course, to cut them up for their old linen and embroideries and lace.

But the French girls do not know this detail. They think they are going to wear them!

The coifs, of course, are picturesque.

Until up to the war, most European countries knew that picturesqueness pays. Russian fete days were glorious with the bright colored "kokochnik" coifs, which are a feature in all Russian historical paintings. Austria and Italy, where the peasants still looked like a comic opera chorus, rejoiced not to have made too much progress.

But in France the "costume of the province" trembled in the balance. French writers and painters glorify it. In their hearts the peasants love their gay, old fashioned styles. Whole sections of France still live upon the picturesqueness of their land and dress. So they reap a rich tourist harvest.

But when the city folk have gone the harm is done. They have excited fatal admiration. Girls and youths of remote villages, misled by ambition, spend their tourist money to bloom out in city clothes.

It threatens ruin to French tourist trade, for tourists wish to see the things they have heard about, and are disappointed to see country girls in city hats. Yet the French Government cannot pass sumptuary laws; and the Beaux Arts Commission, watching jealously, with full powers over architectural relics, may not even give advice for the preserving of beautiful old local styles. How shall it tell country girls: "Your coifs are beautiful. Your city hats are silly!"

But the local boosting syndicates ("Syndicats d'Initiative") are scandalized and frightened; and as they belong to the big towns of the girls' districts they hold "local costume fetes" and offer valuable prizes for the prettiest girls who are best dressed in the old styles, and even take them up to Paris and on tour to show them off in vain. For when the girls have had their trip they bring back city clothes!

"Girls!" cry the boosting syndicates, "you're hurting tourist trade! Put on your coifs!"

They won't.

That is to say, they wouldn't.

But now they are hesitating.

The American young women abroad are doing a beautiful thing—nothing less than tipping the scales to save French picturesqueness!

They buy up the despised coifs everywhere they can, and when they get them home they cut them up to make rich, beautiful insertions. Motoring through the villages, they give good money to the peasant girls for the headgear they had deemed no longer "fashionable!"

A seven inch square of rare old Marandaise lace was cut out of a coif and bought at the bargain price of thirty cents, and forty cents each for old dames' caps has been currently accepted—but now less so!

Speculative native women, in many localities, make it a business to have fine old coifs in stock by the hundreds, which they have picked up for a trifle and sell dearer. They were family treasures. Yet they had cost work only. Girls embroider them while tending geese. Mothers weave handmade linen while the baby sleeps. Wives make little squares of lace while they watch the pot boil. The local speculator seeks them out. When they have their natural cream color from lying fifty years in a drawer she respects the tint. When the coif is grimed with dandruff from an old trot's thatch or soiled and crumpled from beauty's gambols on the greensward, she sends it to the dry cleaner. Prices are going up, but——.

The French country girls are in their cruel dilemma.

"These elegant Americans desire to buy new coifs," they argue. "Girls so smart and well appointed cannot make mistakes in fashion. Dame, coifs must be still in style!"

At Marennes, a fine girl stood by her spinning wheel in the doorway to be photographed. On her head she wore with pride, just the simple wonder of all France!

It is an oblong white edifice of intricately embroidered filmy mousseline stretched over two great fluted wings. The fluted edges are starched lace.

"How much the coif?" she was asked.

"Twenty-eight dollars!" was the modest answer—note the price in dollars, fixed by a remote French country girl, to profit by the exchange in francs.

But now she knows her coif is fashionable!

And these Marennes girls are determined to be fashionable, more than all others, for the good reason close to pride and self-respect that Marennes is a city very populous with young men.

Near by, the Isle of Oleron, the girls would rather sell their hair than sell their coifs!

In half the whole French countryside the coif remains triumphant.

In the North it has long been but a characterless little bonnet. In the Vosges German influence, more or less, chased it out—except in Alsace, where it is all ribbon.

In Normandy and Brittany they boast competing "wonders." Around Tours and Orleans the coif fights for its life. But the girls of Angers sport white headpieces as splendid as those of Arles, and all through the Cevennes, Auvergne, Dauphiny, Savoy, the Pyrenees and the entire Atlantic coast the old traditions and the fortunate influence of the American tourist girl with her pocketbook are tipping the scales in favor of the coif—to make it "fashionable" by a misunderstanding!

In just one remote district the French girls have a suspicion that the rich Americans may be mistaken. Of course, the Americans think that the coif is fashionable. Otherwise, they would not buy it up in this way. But, who knows? The Americans are foreigners and have not the entire French chic. Perhaps hats are more fashionable, and they don't know it?

These are the girls of the Cevennes. They had a grand idea. Which is truly fashionable, the hat or the coif? In doubt, the girls of the Cevennes have joined the two!

"It is 'the whipsaw coif' that 'gets you goin' and comin',' " as the A. E. F. said. The girls of the Cevennes desire to be "as good as city girls" by wearing hats if hats are the right thing, and yet because, perhaps, the coif is fashionable they sew a hat (or upturned work basket) into the top of the historical black lace coif of the Cevennes.